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NSC BRIEFING Approved For Release 2000/08/29 : CIA-RDP79R00890A000300010005-8 1 April 1954

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN TONKIN

25X1X7 The latest estimate by [REDACTED] is that a major assault on Dien Bien Phu will occur by 5 April. The Viet Minh is expected to take advantage of the dark of the moon, and the period of greatest darkness will begin on 2 April.

Viet Minh forces there apparently have completed most of their preparations for an attack. Trenches have approached to within 50 yards of some French positions and now form a maze completely around the central complex. Strongpoint Isabelle to the south is virtually surrounded by this trench system.

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Our army attaché in Hanoi reports that recent photos show

present entrenchments on a far greater scale and much closer than  
those around Gabrielle and Beatrice prior to the enemy's successful  
25X1 attacks there. [REDACTED] a significant shift to  
close-in artillery and mortar positions.

Although every indication points to an imminent attack, General  
Navarre has suggested the possibility that the enemy may choose  
instead a prolonged "smothering action." In this case, continued  
artillery and mortar harassment of the French positions could be  
expected, together with intensified efforts to prevent French use of  
the airstrip and disrupt supply and the evacuation of the wounded.

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Meanwhile, [REDACTED] that about 13,000 enemy

troops -- presumably recent recruits which had been undergoing training -- are moving from the southwest and north of the Tonkin delta to reinforce at Dien Bien Phu. Their arrival there would raise enemy strength to about 47,500. The largest group, 10,000 men who supposedly started from Thanh Hoa, may make slow progress because of heavy rains.

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The Viet Minh is continuing to move supplies into the Dien Bien

Phu area. The most recent French estimate of the enemy's over-all supply situation was that of 13 March, when it was believed that sufficient supplies were present to support 50,000 men for two months. Since then, the Viet Minh reportedly has replaced the 4,000 rounds of 105mm artillery ammunition expended through 25 March, and the French have information that the enemy has requested medical supplies for the month of May.

The problem of evacuating French casualties grows more serious daily. The daily rate of wounded is about 70. Some of the casualties are ambulatory and can be treated locally, but the rate of seriously wounded still exceeds evacuation capabilities, and at last report there were 90 cases requiring urgent evacuation.

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25X1C [REDACTED] his radio appeals to the Viet Minh for safe passage for ambulance planes will be honored. [REDACTED] 25X1C the enemy hopes thus to make him yield for humanitarian reasons, but he states that even 3,000 casualties would not make him do so.

A French Union force of about 5,000 troops is now engaged in a clearing mission in the valleys north of Luang Prabang. Although their primary mission is against Viet Minh guerrilla forces in this area, it is possible that some link-up could eventually be made with the defenders at Dien Bien Phu.

Our service attachés in Saigon stated on 26 March their combined opinion as of that date was that the French can and will hold at Dien Bien Phu.

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In support of this view, they pointed out that strength-wise and defensively the French were in a good position, and that their margin of superiority when the attack came would be in air support. They pointed out, however, that good flying weather remained an important factor.

25X1X7 In the Tonkin delta, [REDACTED] all major Viet Minh units formerly outside the defense perimeter have now infiltrated. This would bring Viet Minh regular strength there to about 20,000, whereas several weeks ago it was in the neighborhood of 13,000. In addition, an estimated 55,000 irregular troops are there, whose quality and capabilities often approach those of the regulars.

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The rail and highway communications between Haiphong and Hanoi have been a major target in recent weeks and the flow of supplies has been seriously disrupted. The [REDACTED] in Hanoi 25X1X7 believes that a major attempt on these facilities will coincide with an assault on Dien Bien Phu. Ambushes of French Union troops are a daily routine, and these with other guerrilla and sabotage tactics are expected to increase.

In central Laos, the French operation to clear and reoccupy areas recently overrun by the Viet Minh has resulted in little contact thus far. [REDACTED] with the object of

reoccupying the coastal strip which has been in Viet Minh hands since 1945, is continuing with steady but unspectacular success. Elsewhere in Indochina, the military picture is relatively quiet.

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